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**A Service-Learning Immersion in a Remote Aboriginal Community:  
Enhancing Pre-Service Teacher Education**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines a service-learning immersion undertaken by pre-service primary teachers in a remote indigenous community and school in Western Australia. The article initially presents the purpose and significance for the immersion in the light of the Australian National Professional Standards for Teachers. The article subsequently outlines the aims and structure of the immersion program. The qualitative methodology underpinning the research is then summarised. Specifically, data were collected pre-immersion (focus group interview and guided journal writing), during the immersion (guided journal writing) and post immersion (focus group interview). Student reflections generated four themes: personal development, professional knowledge, cultural awareness, and Aboriginal education.

*Key Words:* Aboriginal, service-learning immersion, pre-service teacher, teacher education

## **Introduction**

Immersion experiences in the form of teaching practicums have long been used as a means to develop skills and provide real-life teaching opportunities for pre-service teachers (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). More recently, service-learning programs have been incorporated into education degrees and diplomas to further position pre-service teachers in real-life situations, particularly in the areas of social justice and special needs education (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Such service-learning programs within teacher education usually aim to provide pre-service teachers with hands-on experiences in an area that is potentially outside of their comfort zone (Colby, Bercau, Clark & Galiardi, 2009). However, what is less evident in the preparation and training of pre-service teachers is the explicit use of service-learning immersion opportunities. This article explores the experiences and perceptions of six pre-service primary school teachers from a university in Western Australia, who undertook a seven-day service-learning immersion in a remote Aboriginal school and community in Western Australia. Specifically, the pre-service teachers assisted in classroom settings during the mornings and interacted within the wider community in the afternoons. The authors (University staff) accompanied the pre-service teachers on the immersion and worked with them during the afternoon projects.

The theoretical perspective for this study entailed an interpretive paradigm incorporating a symbolic interactionist lens. The goal of interpretive social science is to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it (Newman, 1997). Pivotal to the notion of symbolic interactionism, a specific theoretical perspective within interpretative social science, is the placing of oneself in the setting of the other, of considering situations from the point of view of “the actor”. Methodologically, symbolic interactionism directs investigators to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those studied (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with this perspective, the current study allowed the researchers to examine the immersion experiences of the pre-service teachers in a remote Aboriginal community from the pre-service teachers’ point of view.

## **Service-Learning**

Service-learning, which underpins this immersion experience, can be defined as “...experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). The concepts of reflection and reciprocity are viewed as essential components of service-learning. It is through opportunities for structured reflection that students are assisted in making links between theory and practice. Reciprocity enables all who participate in service-learning to benefit, “all parties in service-learning are learners and help determine what is to be learned. Both the server and those served teach, and both learn” (Kendall as cited in Jacoby, 1996, p. 7). A sense of empowerment is created when those involved in the service-learning view each other as equals and mutually contribute to the learning outcomes. Thus the use of the hyphen in the word service-learning symbolises the balance of both the service and the learning that comes from the experience.

Successful implementation of service-learning is underpinned by four fundamental components (Kaye, 2004). These components are grouped into: “preparation; action; reflection; and demonstration” (Kaye, 2004, p. 10). First, it is through preparation that a need is identified, investigated, and analysed. Second, this need is then addressed through an action plan based on the elements identified through the preparation. Third, as the students

put their plans into action, they begin a process of reflection that enables them “to consider how the experience, knowledge and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and their communities” (Chambers & Lavery, 2012, p. 2). Fourth, through demonstration the students showcase their learning in ways appropriate to the service-learning context, drawing on the previous components of preparation, action and reflection.

Service-learning has the potential to facilitate social change. For instance, Cipolle (2010) argued that students who participate in service-learning develop a “greater awareness and broader perspective of social issues ... that enhance their feelings of competency and efficacy” (p. 11). She developed a *Social Justice Model of Service-Learning* and within this structure articulated four essential elements of *Critical Consciousness Development*. These elements are Self-Awareness, Awareness of Others, Awareness of Social Issues and the Ethic of Service/Change Agents (Cipolle, p. 11) and are important considerations in planning and structuring the service-learning experience. Specifically, these four essential elements entail developing a deeper awareness of self; developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of others; developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of social issues; and seeing one’s potential to make change. She maintained that these elements can be viewed as the ‘building blocks’ for developing an attitude and disposition towards a “social justice orientation to service” (Cipolle, p. 9). She argued, moreover, that it is through the development of a ‘critical consciousness’ that the “service-learning becomes transformative in nature” (Cipolle, p. 39).

Service-learning is also viewed as a way of learning through life’s experiences, problems and solutions. Prentice and Robinson (2010), for instance, outlined the value of service-learning in three primary areas. First, students developed both academically and career wise, becoming “well rounded individuals”. Second, students were able to “identify their biases and to replace those biases with accurate information” (p.11). In doing so, they acknowledged the perceptions of others, thus developing their cultural competency. Third, students recognised the need to “embrace everyone’s humanity and that, as human beings, we all need each other” (Prentice & Robinson, p. 11).

### **Purpose and Research Question**

The underlying purpose for the study into the perceptions of the six pre-service primary teachers was to ascertain the potential of a service-learning immersion program to successfully build pre-service teachers’ competencies in the area of Aboriginal education. In the light of the purpose of the research there was one primary research question. That is: In what ways can a service-learning immersion program successfully build pre-service teacher’s competencies in the area of Aboriginal education? Such competencies are a requirement of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) that must be demonstrated as part of pre-service teacher training.

The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) provides leadership to Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments on teaching and school leadership. One of the Institute’s roles is the development and maintenance of a nationally recognised competency framework for teachers. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) describe key elements of effective teaching and represent an analysis of contemporary practice by teachers throughout Australia. On completion of their initial teacher education, all graduate teachers are required to demonstrate the requisite knowledge, practice and professional engagement,

to plan for and manage learning programs for students, including competency in working with Indigenous students. Specifically, these competencies are:

- 1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander students,
- 2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

### **Significance**

The significance of the study lies in the potential to add to the body of knowledge on the benefits of experiential learning in pre-service teacher Aboriginal education. Evans (2012, p. 58) notes that “the experiential approaches to providing Aboriginal studies perspectives within teacher education (fieldwork, project-based coursework ....) have been significant in helping students make sense of their theoretical/historical studies in the field while simultaneously aligning their professional capabilities with policy expectations.” It was anticipated that the immersion in the remote Aboriginal school and community would provide valuable evidence as to the impact of the service-learning experience on the pre-service teachers and their competency in addressing the Australian Professional Standards for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

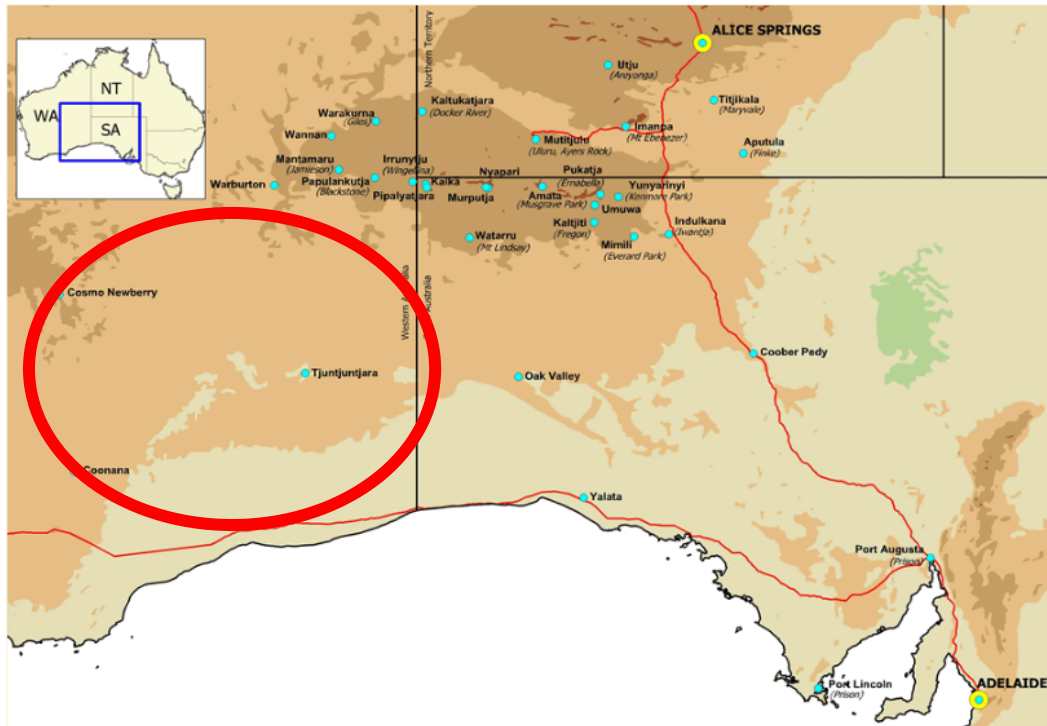
### **Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

This study sought explicitly to explore the experiences and perceptions of six primary pre-service teachers undertaking an immersion experience living and working for a week in a remote Aboriginal community school, Western Australia. Five of the pre-service teachers undertook this immersion to meet the service requirements of a second year service-learning unit *Leadership through Service-Learning*. These five pre-service teachers were in their second year of a 4-year Bachelor of Education degree. Four were female and one was male. All five were twenty years of age and none had any prior experience of working in a remote Aboriginal community. The sixth student, a male, was in his first year of a Master of Teaching degree, having initially completed a Bachelor of Behavioural Science. This student, who was twenty-three at the time, did have experience, along with a passion, for working with Aboriginal people in remote communities. All six pre-service teachers were Caucasian, of European descent. All had volunteered for the immersion, which occurred in July 2013.

#### ***Context***

The remote Aboriginal community is located 700 kilometres east of Kalgoorlie in the Great Victoria Desert, almost on the border of Western Australia and South Australia (Figure 1). The community has a population of approximately 160 people and maintains many of the traditional cultural practices of the people known as *pilangu* *u*, meaning “from the spinifex plains”. Most of the community members speak the Pitjantjatjara language, with English frequently the third or fourth language spoken. Community art projects are a central focus of the community, with areas specifically designated to “Men’s Business” and “Women’s Business”. Figure 2 provides a view of the physical environment surrounding the community. The remote Aboriginal community school caters from Kindergarten to lower secondary, with an enrolment of 31 students. There are four staff members, two being the Principal and class teacher, with two support staff, all of whom live in the community. Figure 3 presents a collage of the remote Aboriginal community school.



*Figure 1:* Location of the remote Aboriginal community in Western Australia  
 (Source: Ara Irititja Project, 2011 - Reproduced with written permission)



*Figure 2:* View of the physical environment surrounding the remote Aboriginal community  
 (Authors' collection)



*Figure 3: Remote Aboriginal community school environs*  
(Printed with written permission from the school principal and participants)

### ***Procedures***

The service-learning immersion undertaken by the six second-year pre-service teachers from the university was of one-week duration, involved participants (pre-service teachers) from a single faculty within the university, and occurred in the participants' home country, albeit in a cultural setting vastly different from the one with which participants were familiar. The six specific goals of the Remote Aboriginal community service-learning immersion were negotiated between the participating university staff and the remote Aboriginal community through the school principal. These were: (a) to increase firsthand knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and the contemporary situation with a specific focus on the 'Spinifex People' from the remote Aboriginal community; (b) to increase knowledge and understanding of living and working in a remote indigenous community; (c) to increase knowledge and understanding of teaching in a remote indigenous community; (d) to support the learning of The Remote Aboriginal community children; (e) to enhance the physical development of the Remote Aboriginal Community School; and (f) to provide a positive and enjoyable experience for the pre-service teachers in a remote community. Many of these goals were equally applicable to staff who accompanied and mentored the pre-service teachers. Table 1 provides an overview of the service-learning immersion program. The length of travel on Days 1, 2 and 7 is illustrative of the geographical distances between 'very remote' communities and metropolitan centres in Western Australia and provided pre-service teachers and accompanying staff with an appreciation of the physical environment in which the remote Aboriginal community was situated.



Table 1

*Service-learning Immersion Program at the Remote Aboriginal Community*

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>
<b>Day 1</b>	Travel by train to Kalgoorlie; travel part-way to the remote Aboriginal community and camp overnight
<b>Day 2</b>	Travel to The Remote Aboriginal community, local induction and share evening meal with local staff
<b>Day 3</b>	Morning in class with children; afternoon working on community-based activities
<b>Day 4</b>	Morning in class with children; afternoon working on community-based activities; trip to Ilkurlka for tea
<b>Day 4</b>	Morning in class with children; afternoon working on community-based activities
<b>Day 5</b>	Morning in class with children; afternoon working on community-based activities
<b>Day 6</b>	Morning in class with children; afternoon working on community-based activities; school community dinner
<b>Day 7</b>	Travel to Rawlinna to catch the Indian Pacific train overnight to Perth

All four fundamental service-learning components (Kaye, 2004) previously outlined were addressed in the immersion to the community. The pre-service teachers met on three occasions with participating staff to prepare for the trip. Through negotiations by the participating staff with the remote Aboriginal Community School Principal, a daily plan of actions for the pre-service teachers was formulated that included both time in the classrooms and service in the school grounds and community. Within the daily plan of activities, structured sessions for reflection were organised for the evenings through group discussions and journal writing. The pre-service teachers were aware of their commitment to share and demonstrate their learning. They made a formal presentation to the sponsoring organisation and at an education conference following the immersion. A book documenting the immersion was also compiled to share the richness and uniqueness of the experience.

***Data Collection***

Data were collected pre-immersion, during the immersion and post-immersion. Because of the highly personal nature of the immersion, the researchers provided a range of data collection options for pre-service teachers to “voice” their experiences and perceptions. Prior to the immersion, pre-service teachers could participate in either a focus group interview or undertake guided journal writing, or do both. All participated in the focus group interview; two also commenced their journals. During the immersion pre-service teachers undertook a regular group reflection each evening followed by guided journal writing. Post immersion, pre-service teachers could choose to partake in either an individual or focus group interview. All opted for the focus group interview. These data collection methods also formed an essential component of the immersion experience: helping to prepare pre-service teachers for the immersion, monitoring pre-service teachers during the immersion, and providing pre-service teachers with a means to debrief and celebrate their experiences following the immersion.

The pre and post immersion focus group interviews were held at the university. These interviews were semi-structured in design and went for approximately thirty minutes. To avoid any potential power differential the interviews were conducted by one of the authors not lecturing to the pre-service teachers that year. The interviews were audiotaped

with permission and subsequently transcribed *verbatim* by a third party. Participants reviewed the transcriptions as a means of enhancing credibility (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Credibility was further enhanced through the use of multiple methods of data collection (focus group interviews and journal writing) and multiple times when the data were collected – pre immersion, during the immersion and post immersion. The pre-immersion interview questions are listed in Table 2. These questions were also used for any pre-immersion journaling. The post immersion questions are listed in Table 3.

Table 2

*Pre-immersion interview and journal questions*

- 
1. How are you feeling about your adventure to remote Aboriginal community and school?
  2. What do you perceive might be some of the challenges?
  3. What benefits might there be to you? To the community? To each other?
  4. Other thoughts ...
- 

Table 3

*Post immersion interview questions*

- 
1. Tell me about your experiences while participating in the remote Aboriginal community and school.
  2. What did you gain from the experience?
  3. What challenges did you face?
  4. How did you find working with your Aboriginal student?
  5. What do you believe is important in teaching within an indigenous educational context?
  6. What did you learn about literacy learning/teaching?
  7. What did you learn about yourself as a teacher?
  8. How has this experience impacted on you personally?
  9. How has this experience impacted on you professionally?
  10. Are there any other comments you would like to make about this experience?
- 

There were two main components to the guided journal writing. The first entailed pre-service teachers having structured time on each evening of the immersion to debrief the experiences of the day with their peers and university staff. This debriefing was followed by quiet time for personal journal writing. The second component involved the five pre-service teachers who undertook the immersion experience as part of the service-learning unit *Leadership through Service-Learning*. These five pre-service teachers were required to submit a formal typed journal as an assessment item within the unit. One of the authors taught this unit and provided a set of guidelines for the journal writing. The journal questions are listed in Table 4. Data collection entailed the researchers reading both sets of journals (with permission).

Table 4

*Journal questions*

- 
1. Today, what struck me in a positive way?
  2. Today, what struck me in a challenging way?
  3. What am I learning about myself as a teacher?
  4. What am I learning about teaching in a remote Aboriginal school?
  5. What am I learning about myself personally?
  6. What questions arise for me so far?
-

### ***Data Analysis***

Content analysis was the preferred process used to explore the pre-service teachers' experiences and self-perceptions while undertaking the immersion experience living and working for a week in the remote Aboriginal community and school, Western Australia. Berg (2007) describes content analysis as "a careful, detailed systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings" (p. 303). The journals and focus group interview transcripts from the UNDA pre-service teachers were examined for themes, patterns, topics, and shared mind-sets.

The format for analysing the data followed that described by Miles and Huberman (1994). That is, data collection, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. First, researchers read the pre-service teacher journals and interview transcripts. Second, the data was reduced through identifying emerging themes where each researcher selected specific segments of language that emphasised particular themes. Finally, these segments were visually displayed under each theme heading whereby all researchers viewed the lists and collectively selected appropriate exemplars of each theme.

### **Results of the Service-learning Immersion**

The key findings of the research into the service-learning immersion can be summarised through the themes of personal development, professional knowledge, cultural awareness, and Aboriginal education. These themes are now addressed.

#### ***Personal development***

All six pre-service teachers referred to the impact of the experience on them personally. They were enthusiastic about the bond that they had developed as young people sharing a challenging and life-changing experience. They had supported each other in doing things that normally they would not have done. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote:

I looked around in shock; we were literally in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing around, no buildings, no hills, no anything, but shrubs and dirt. We were to sleep on the ground in swags, no tents or shelter. This was at first deemed a challenge but overall a massive highlight for me.

Another reflection recalls this experience of camping in the outback as "one of the most peaceful moments of my life, lying there, under the stars and with the heat from the fire warming me ... in such a beautiful part of my country".

The pre-service teachers also expressed a strong sense of satisfaction in giving something tangible back to the remote Aboriginal community, as well as establishing many personal and emotional connections to the students and staff in the school. In particular, the community service project of repairing and re-locating the goal posts on the local oval proved a valuable lesson on many levels. As one participant recorded:

This may sound strange as they are just goal posts put into the ground, but to me they represent so much more. We four girls collected, sanded, painted, repainted, positioned and made cement to have these goal posts put into the ground. Personally it was a milestone as I have never done these kinds of tasks or physical work...I felt proud of our efforts and my own.

On a deeper level, there was the long-term impact associated with this particular community service:

The most special thing to me about the goal posts is the knowledge that they will be there for years to come. We, as a group of young pre-service teachers, have left our

mark on the community whilst also giving them something they wanted and needed which can be enjoyed by the students and the adults.

The pre-service teachers' personal beliefs and values were also challenged by the service-learning immersion. There were a number of quite confronting issues related to the community environment that the pre-service teachers found difficult to accept. Yet they learned to look beyond these to the purpose and goals of the immersion experience. For example, one pre-service teacher noted, "My first impression was that the community needed a lot of work and needed to be cleaned up and cared for. Later I learnt that this was not a problem or concern for the people in the community." Another pre-service teacher was very honest about his personal challenge and perceptions of Aboriginal people before participating in the service-learning immersion:

I have come to the realisation that I am prejudice towards Indigenous people. I denied this prior to my journey to the community, but towards the end I have come to understand my feelings towards Indigenous people and why I felt that way...I have had little contact with Indigenous people my whole life and I believe that this is the basis for my prejudgements and prejudices.

Later in his journal, this pre-service teacher shared how he believed the immersion experience had made him less discriminatory and more understanding of the culture and way of life of Indigenous people. He concluded with an affirmation that "experiencing and learning about Indigenous culture will bring about a change in the way these people are viewed by the majority of people within Australia."

#### *Professional knowledge*

The pre-service teachers' believed that their professional knowledge was enhanced by observing and working daily within the classrooms. As they observed the classrooms each morning they noted various challenges associated with the need to continually engage students at school. They were inspired by the commitment of staff members to developing programs and practices to support the needs of their students. As one pre-service teacher noted: "spending time within the classroom allowed me the opportunity to look at effective teaching and learning strategies that could be used with Aboriginal students." This same pre-service teacher noted that what she also found interesting "was that many of the strategies that I had used in my Year One class on practicum were also employed by the early childhood teacher with these students."

The pre-service teachers believed that it was a privilege to observe the dedicated teachers who had chosen to teach in such a remote Aboriginal community. They recognised and appreciated the chance to see these teachers in action as was indicated by the following journal entry:

She is an amazing teacher and the way she works with the students is definitely having an impact on me...she taught me no matter what a student's circumstances are, you can never give up, because you never know that you could be the one to make a difference and this could provide students with a difference for the future.

Some pre-service teachers used the immersion experience to reflect on their own professional plans. As one pre-service teacher wrote: "I have learnt many things about myself in just those seven days... I do not think that teaching remote is my thing. I believe that to do it well you need to be highly motivated, skilled and the key element, completely dedicated to the lifestyle and children". She went on to write: "I do not think I would enjoy life, living that remote for long periods of time." By way of contrast, another pre-service teacher observed:

“From what I have witnessed and experienced, I can honestly say that teaching rural is something that interests me. Therefore next year I plan to complete a rural practicum.”

### *Cultural awareness*

All pre-service teachers felt a heightened sense of cultural awareness through participation in the service-learning immersion. For example, one pre-service teacher reflected, “Today we had the rare opportunity to be invited into a camp where some Aboriginal elderly people were staying and experienced a few traditional behaviours.” She observed, “This involved skinning and cutting wild turkey and kangaroos while an elderly woman was cooking witchetty grubs, a cultural Aboriginal food. This was very interesting, as it was rare for anyone outside the community to view these traditions”.

The pre-service teachers showed considerable interest in the speaking of the native Pitjantjatjara language. However, they found the language a challenge when communicating with children and community members. The reality of teaching children who do not speak standard Australian English was significant for all six pre-service teachers. It heightened their awareness of the remoteness of the Remote Aboriginal community and some of the daily challenges of classroom teaching.

The gender specific roles of the Aboriginal people were reinforced through the designated areas of “Men’s Business” and “Women’s Business”. On one level, the pre-service teachers viewed it as a privilege to be included in such cultural practices. As one of their number observed, “While in the community we were given the opportunity to visit some of the elders and observe their paintings.” She commented further, “It was interesting to see and understand the representations of the paintings and I learnt that it is through these paintings the elders tell the story of ‘their country’...this was something I did not know before.”

A visit to the Women’s Centre provided yet another cultural experience for the female pre-service teachers. It enabled them to interact with the female elders and to observe their traditional crafts and paintings. The pre-service teachers were completely immersed in the Pitjantjatjara language, as the women talked together in this language as they made damper and soup for the community. The visit also challenged the pre-service teachers in terms of, in the words of one pre-service teacher, “the women’s place in the community”. As she noted, “women have a place: they know their place and it is not what I consider right”. During the service-learning immersion, various restrictions were imposed on the movement of the female pre-service teachers due to traditional practices happening within the remote Aboriginal community. For a number of the female pre-service teachers, understanding and having such limitations placed on their movements was eye-opening and quite confronting. The service-learning immersion certainly provided a cultural reality of living and working in such a remote Aboriginal community - in just a short time!

### *Aboriginal education*

The focus group interviews provided a rich source of data on the pre-service teachers’ views on Aboriginal education. As a group of young pre-service teachers they were vocal in what they believed was essential in teaching Aboriginal students. They were emphatic about the need to show respect for the students, their culture and language. There was also a strong belief that the classroom learning needed to be real, authentic and meaningful to the students and connect to their culture. Others commented that it was essential to develop community partnerships to support the students in attending and participating in the school learning

program. As one pre-service teacher reflected: “I struggled with the schooling opportunities for the students...in the time we were in the community.” Identifying the issue of student attendance, she went on to state, “What I found hard was knowing that as the Kindergarten to Year 2 students I was working with got older they would slowly stop attending school and would follow the same cycle as the generations above them.”

The pre-service teachers also remarked on the challenges of education for students in the Year 7-12 classroom. Having observed first hand this classroom, the pre-service teachers acknowledged how difficult and demanding it was for the teachers working in this remote community. They commented on the ways cultural barriers, behavior management, resources and the individual needs of the students all contributed to the challenges.

## **Discussion**

The motivation for this study into the perceptions of the six pre-service primary teachers was to ascertain the potential of an immersion program to successfully build pre-service teachers’ competencies in the area of Aboriginal education. As such, the primary research question asked: In what ways can a service-learning immersion program successfully build pre-service teacher’s competencies in the area of Aboriginal education? These competencies are a requirement of the Australian National Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) that must be demonstrated as part of pre-service teacher training. The results are now discussed in the light of the impact that the service-learning immersion program had in developing the pre-service teachers’ cultural competencies in the important area of Aboriginal education.

The six pre-service teachers communicated how the experience had impacted on various aspects of their lives personally and professionally. The term “life-changing” was used to describe the way many viewed the immersion. As one participant shared, “I also learnt that teaching really is for me. By choosing this career I can and will make a difference to the future.” The service-learning immersion reinforced the pre-service teachers’ passion to work with Aboriginal students. However the immersion also made the pre-service teachers acutely aware of the challenges and reality of working in such a very remote location. Some expressed the desire to teach in a rural or regional setting, or in a remote context that was not quite as isolated as Remote Aboriginal community. For others, there was the desire to learn more about Aboriginal people, and their culture.

However, the impact of the service-learning immersion went well beyond just the classroom learning to the very heart of service-learning, often described as the connection of “heads, hearts and hands” (Billig, n.d.). For the pre-service teachers, the connection of these elements was real, challenging and inspiring. Indeed it was “life-changing”. Through service within the community, the pre-service teachers gained a greater understanding and respect for the Aboriginal people of the community. They also felt a deep sense of satisfaction that the work they had done for the community was valuable and appreciated. Their “hands” in the various activities and projects were used in fruitful and fulfilling ways. There was an open acknowledgement by the pre-service teachers that they previously held misconceptions about Aboriginal people and their culture, with some admitting to being “racist”, “prejudiced” and “afraid” of Aboriginal people.

The remote Aboriginal community service-learning immersion touched at the very “heart” of the pre-service teachers and prompted their thinking about social and cultural issues (the head). The pre-service teachers’ social consciousness was enhanced by the

experience and in many ways they became advocates for Aboriginal people and for teaching in remote communities. As one participant observed:

The reality is that this experience was one that has not only changed my perspective and understanding of Aboriginal people and their culture but one that I feel has also impacted on me emotionally. I can clearly say that the week I spent in Tjuntjuntara was one of the most life-changing experiences I have ever been in and has helped me in a way I did not know was possible.

Certain attitudes of the pre-service teachers epitomised Cipolle's contention that service-learning can become "a vehicle for action on their beliefs and making a difference" (2010, p. 42).

The notion of "reciprocity" is essential in any successful service-learning program. The Principal of the remote Aboriginal community school acknowledged the success of the service-learning immersion in a letter to each of the pre-service teachers and staff who participated (W. Klein, personal communication, August 21). He observed that the collaboration between university and the remote Aboriginal school community had "produced a significantly successful project that provides a framework for future development and activity." He remarked that this success was "based on the mutual respect and commitment of the people involved to work together ... in an activity that was clearly child and student focused." He commented on the "immediate positive impact on the school's physical attributes and appearance", and noted that the experience had "provided enjoyment and fun for many". Moreover, he highlighted that "there is also real potential to have an impact on people and organisations involved in the long term."

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research suggests that the pre-service teachers' knowledge of teaching strategies for Aboriginal students was deepened by both the direct experience of seeing the teachers working in their classrooms and by their own participation working with the Aboriginal students. Moreover, the results indicate that the pre-service teachers developed an increased understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal people as a result of their immersion in the community. As a consequence of the results and discussion, the authors offer four recommendations for consideration.

First, institutions responsible for pre-service teacher education look to developing links with Aboriginal communities as a prelude to fostering reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians through service-learning immersion experiences. Second, those responsible for pre-service education explore the potential of service-learning immersion programs as a way of promoting cultural awareness in pre-service teachers. Aboriginal people need to have an integral part in the development of any such programs. Third, those responsible for pre-service education offer a range of other service-learning opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop understanding and respect of Aboriginal people. Such opportunities might include homework programs for Aboriginal children in boarding schools, literacy and numeracy courses in particular Aboriginal schools, and working with Aboriginal children in child protection and juvenile detention. Fourth, those responsible for preparing pre-service teachers use experiential learning opportunities to complement existing coursework on effective strategies for teaching Aboriginal students.

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